



Bringing back the Bilby

Rita Cutter and her fellow Birriliburu rangers
refuse to lose the Bilby from their country.

Ever since Bush Heritage ecologist Dr Vanessa Westcott has known Rita Cutter, the Birriliburu ranger has spoken about the land where she was born: Mungarlu, where the red dirt of the Gibson Desert formed the backdrop to her childhood.

“When I’m on country, it’s part of me, that ground, that *ngurra* [home],” says Rita. “When I touch my country, when I put my foot on that land, I have tears.”

Mungarlu is in the northern part of the Birriliburu Indigenous Protected Area, a 6.6 million-hectare tract of central West Australian desert that is managed by Martu Traditional Owners in partnership with Bush Heritage Australia and the Desert Support Services.

Vanessa has walked beside Rita on many parts of her country, watching and learning about the land and the species that call it home. But she has yet to visit Mungarlu.

Now, thanks to a federal government grant awarded to Bush Heritage and Birriliburu through the Threatened

Species Fund, she, Rita and other Birriliburu rangers will have the chance. Among other things, they will be searching for signs of the endangered Bilby, known as *Muntalngaku* in Rita’s language.

Once widespread throughout Australia, Bilby numbers fell significantly in the early twentieth century and the current population is thought to be fewer than 10,000. Today, Aboriginal people own or manage about 70 per cent of the Bilby’s remaining range – and they are at the centre of the species’ national recovery plan, which is a first for any such plan in Australia.

“The grant was highly competitive and we are thrilled we were successful. It means we can now reach this special and remote part of Birriliburu country and undertake this important work,” says Vanessa.

The grant will allow the team to extend the Bilby conservation work that they’ve been successfully



↑ Photo by Kathy Atkinson/AUSCAPE
 ↘ Photo by Bruce Thomson

undertaking further south-west in Birriliburu's Katjarra (Carnarvon Range) region. This includes traditional patchwork burning to maintain the Bilby's habitat, monitoring feral cats and foxes and using traditional tracking techniques to find and monitor Bilby burrows.

"The rangers will also have the chance to learn new skills," says Vanessa. "For example, they'll learn to set up motion-sensor cameras to help monitor Bilbies."

The grant is welcome news to Rita, whose joy at returning to Mungarlu is tangible.

"I get to go right back to my country where my parents were living and where I was born. When I'm out bush all the young people sing out to me. I am happy to teach them. It's been good learnin' them up."

The team's determination to save the Bilby received a huge injection of fresh energy in 2016 at the inaugural Bilby Festival held in the desert community of Kiwirrkurra, Western Australia.



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→ Birrillburu ranger and Martu Elder Rita Cutter.
Photo by Annette Ruzicka

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“The festival was the first of its kind,” says Vanessa. “It was such a powerful experience. Rangers from dozens of Indigenous ranger groups attended to coordinate efforts and share knowledge... It got them fired up.”

A number of ranger groups that attended the festival, including the Birrillburu rangers, are now working together to better monitor the species through projects such as the ‘Bilby Blitz’, which aims to collate monitoring data collected by ranger groups across the remote areas where the species remains. Data from the blitz will inform the National Bilby Recovery Plan, which is being updated to include input from Aboriginal people.

“I’ll never forget hearing senior Kiwirrkurra Rangers talk at the festival about the species they’ve lost in their lifetime or species they can remember hearing stories about. They reeled off a list: ‘The Brush-tailed Possum is gone,’ they said. ‘The Burrowing Bettong, the Rufous Hare-wallaby, the Northern Quoll – all gone.’ It reminded us that the Bilby is one of the last species left in the desert that is in that small to-medium size bracket, making it even more important to protect it.”

Vanessa’s hope is that by working together, Aboriginal rangers will be able to stop the decline in Bilby populations. And there is plenty of reason to hope.

“People like Rita who are knowledgeable about the Bilby and speak from the heart, they infect everyone around them with their energy. People can see how important the Bilby is to her, and it makes them want to do something to help.”

Rita has good reason to speak from the heart. The Bilby resides in it as strongly as her homeland, Mungarlu does.

“Me and the Bilby got one country,” she says, with characteristic flair. ●

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